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WASHINGTON

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Bush

Vice President George Bush said Monday his recent tour convinced him African leaders view the United States as "the catalyst of peace" and are ridding their continent of Soviet influence.

"Africa is a land of opportunity, but no longer for the Soviet Union," Bush told an American Enterprise Institute forum. "They've had their chance. And the signs now point toward increasing irrelevance where Soviet influence in Africa is concerned."

Bush said he found "a desire for partnership with the United States" in talks with leaders of seven African nations during the 27,000-mile trip that also took him to Moscow for the funeral of Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev.

However, Bush said a 40-minute meeting in Moscow with Brezhnev's successor, Yuri Andropov, left him still wondering how the change in the Kremlin leadership might affect U.S.-Soviet relations, strained in the last few years.

"He is well versed in Western methods and minds," Bush said of Andropov. "In this sense, he is a highly sophisticated man. Whether or not this will prove to be to our advantage, or cause even deeper concern, remains to be seen."

Bush said the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Soviets in Afghanistan makes it "extremely difficult" to improve relations with Moscow. A halt in the use of such weapons, he said, "would be a signal which we would note and to which we could respond."

Seeking to alter past perceptions of U.S. policy toward Africa, Bush said the United States does not consider the continent "a big chessboard on which we and the Soviets move pieces."

The United States does not "ask other nations to copy us or agree with us on everything" and welcomes non-alignment in the belief that African nationalism can deter Soviet encroachment, Bush said.

"All the Soviets have to offer," he said, "are cheap, used weapons, tractors that don't work, Cuban mercenaries and an opportunity to have your government infiltrated with people who want to take over and then order you around like servants."

Despite anti-American rhetoric, Bush said, African leaders "view us as the catalyst for peace, not the Soviet Union."

Bush indicated his session with Andropov provided little insight into future relations with Moscow, but said negative appraisals of Andropov based on his 15 years as head of the Soviet intelligence service, the KGB, might be premature.

Bush, a former director of the CIA, said anyone with such extensive access to foreign intelligence might be better able "to comprehend the true intentions" of an adversary than someone with little experience in foreign affairs.

The vice president said he and Andropov, once direct counterparts in the espionage business, "were at least able to talk."